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Who Framed Roger Rabbit? by Robert Zemeckis
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Reviews

WHO FRAMED ROGER RABBIT?

Director: Robert Zemeckis. Script: Jeffrey Price and Peter Seaman. Director of animation: Richard Williams. Disney.

Imagine, if you can, that the characters who appear in animated cartoons actually exist. A repressed minority and endangered species known as Toons, they live on the fringes of Hollywood in 1947 in a ghetto known as Toontown; when they aren't working for Disney or the other cartoon studios, they take on menial positions as waitresses, bartenders, cigarette girls, bouncers, and entertainers at a segregated club called the Ink and Paint. (Among the acts at this dive are Donald Duck and Daffy Duck, who perform a duet on two pianos, and a vocalist named Jessica, a curvy vamp who's a human Toon, accompanied by the bebop crows from *Dumbo*.)

Imagine, as well, that the live-action 40s Hollywood that these Toons are working in is the world of Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe, or at least that world as it was revised and "updated" by Robert Towne when he scripted *Chinatown* in the 70s, supplemented by such nostalgic items as Big Red streetcars. In the place of Chandler's Marlowe and Towne's Jake Gittes is Eddie Valiant (Bob Hoskins), a private eye whose jobs are mainly Toon-related, and whose partner and brother Teddy was killed a few years ago when an unknown Toon dropped a piano on the brothers, considerably dampening Eddie's sense of humor and appreciation of Toons in the process.

Eddie is hired by R. K. Maroon (Alan Tilvern) of Maroon Pictures, a cartoon studio, to photograph the marital infidelities of the voluptuous Jessica, who's married to one of Maroon's stars, Roger Rabbit. Roger's in such a state about his unhappy marriage to Jessica that he keeps blowing his lines—or, more precisely, reacting to cartoon violence with a circle of twittering birds over his head rather than the halo of stars indicated in the script. Maroon hopes that a few compromising photos of Jessica will persuade Roger to drop her and get over his agitated lovesickness, and Eddie, borrowing a camera from his bartender girlfriend Dolores (Joanna Cassidy), obligingly snaps some pictures through the window of Jessica's

dressing room at the Ink and Paint; they show her "playing patty cake" with Marvin Acme (Stubby Kaye), a jokester who supplies props and gags to Maroon's cartoons.

In Maroon's office, Eddie shows the photos to Roger, who goes into explosive paroxysms of grief that send him crashing through the window. (Being a Toon, he can easily survive such violence, and is next seen sobbing on the studio lot below.) The next day, inside Marvin Acme's cavernous warehouse of props, Acme himself is found murdered, a safe having been dropped on his head. Roger Rabbit, who pleads his innocence to Eddie, is the major suspect. Hot on Roger's trail is Judge Doom (Christopher Lloyd), a Toon-hating villain cloaked in black, who has devised a primordial stew of turpentine, acetone, and benzine known as the Dip, concocted for the purpose of dissolving undesirable Toons. (In an attempt to emphasize the minority status of Toons, the film-makers reportedly first thought of calling this deadly brew the Final Solution.)

It's an irritating but essential facet of the most exciting and original movies that they're the hardest to describe with any precision, and the preceding paragraphs, at best, sketch the point of departure for *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* and the explicit meaning of its title—which uses the *film noir* meaning of "framed" to ask, Who set Roger up? A less obvious reading of "framed," a self-referential and cartoon meaning, leads to the question of where Roger and his movie came from—another mystery, and one that's much harder to solve.

A good auteurist case might be made that director Robert Zemeckis is the main culprit. A writer and director whose sensibility often suggests the jeering teenage irreverence found in the original *Mad* (when it was still a comic book), Zemeckis came to prominence under the tutelage of Steven Spielberg, cowriting the underrated *1941*, *I Wanna Hold Your Hand*, and *Used Cars*, as well as directing the latter two. He went on to direct the less interesting but more successful *Romancing the Stone* and to cowrite and direct the somewhat better *Back to the Future*, another box-office hit.

Certainly all of the above works are triumphs of engineering with varying degrees of cartoonish detail, anticipating some of the conditions that make *Roger Rabbit* possible. But can we, on the basis of this circumstantial evidence, convict Zemeckis of being *Roger's* auteur?

What about former advertising men Jeffrey Price and Peter Seaman, who wrote the initial script independent of Zemeckis? What about the novel they adapted, Gary K. Wolf's *Who Censored Roger Rabbit?* (which is about comic strip characters)? What about the director of animation, the brilliant Richard Williams, or the well over 300 other animators who worked under his guidance? What about the countless past animators who developed the famous cartoon characters used for crucial cameos here? What about the special effects devised at George Lucas's Industrial Light & Magic? And what about Spielberg himself—who not only made Zemeckis, the brightest of his proteges, possible, but, as executive producer, participated in the framing of Roger as well?

Paradoxically, despite the number of criss-crossing creative intelligences behind the camera—as well as a team of workers that seems about the size of a small country—*Roger Rabbit* consciously and systematically mystifies the creative work behind the cartoons that it euphorically exemplifies and celebrates. The only remotely auteur-like characters in sight—jester Acme and an irate studio director—are dispensed with early on in the proceedings, and the great Hollywood animators of the past are present only through example and emulation. The Toons are portrayed as self-generated creatures who create their own gags whenever they aren't acting in studio productions—embodiments of the poetic notion that characters can exist independently of their works and authors.

Indeed, one of the central metaphysical conceits of this movie, underlying many of its most interesting effects, is that the separate worlds of Walt Disney, Tex Avery, Chuck Jones, Bob Clampett, and others are strangely compatible; and thanks to real-life, behind-the-scenes agreements, Donald and Daffy, Bugs and Mickey, Porky and Tinker Bell (and even Betty Boop in black and white) can all rub shoulders for the first time.

There's a hint of perversity in all of this—a sense of transgression in crossing studio boundaries and fusing disparate styles and sensibilities—that is only one of the means by which *Roger Rabbit* moves beyond the borders of simple light entertainment. Although Roger steadfastly maintains, in a running argument with Eddie, that Toons do crazy things only in order to make people laugh, in fact, cartoons are too closely related to dreams and waking

fantasies to be written off simply as innocuous laugh machines. The “serious” and scary stretches of the early Disney features are only the most obvious examples of this. The traditional seven-minute Hollywood cartoon, with its everyday violations of the laws of space and time, life and death, thought and action, routinely traffics in material that is potentially frightening and disturbing as well as funny, and the emotional density of *Roger Rabbit* is due in part to its capacity to teeter on such dangerous edges.

The combination of *film noir* and cartoon intensifies this possibility for upset. By and large, the separate worlds and characters of these two genres are shown to coexist and eventually to learn from one another, but Jessica is a character caught in the interface between them. (Even her full name poses an existential problem: Jessica Rabbit describes a human Toon married to a rabbit.) Modeled after Veronica Lake and Lauren Bacall in the 40s, as amplified and upholstered by the crazed sexual imaginations of Tex Avery and Frank Tashlin (the latter worked in live action after a career in cartooning and animation, and in *The Girl Can't Help It* and *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?* made Jayne Mansfield into a live-action cartoon), Jessica is certainly more of a sex symbol in the movie than Eddie's live-action girlfriend Dolores. Her voice is supplied, significantly, by an uncredited Kathleen Turner, underlining Jessica's relation to Turner's vamp roles in movies like *Body Heat* and *Prizzi's Honor*—films that are themselves nostalgic pastiches, harking back respectively to styles of the 40s and 60s. Yet because Jessica is married to a rabbit Toon, and at the very least flirts with such live-action males as Marvin Acme and Eddie Valiant, hints of bestiality on the one hand (“I love you more than any woman has ever loved a rabbit”) and fetishism on the other are never far away. (“I'm not bad,” she professes to Eddie after literally blowing him a cartoon kiss, “I'm just drawn that way.”) Such perversity has always been a staple of cartoons—think of the polymorphous perversity of Disney—but *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* makes it a good deal more explicit and unsettling.

Perhaps the fundamental philosophical difference between *film noir* and cartoons can be found in their separate approaches to death and mortality. As animator Peter Burness put it a quarter of a century ago, “In the American car-

*Bob Hoskins,
as Eddie
Valiant,
hopelessly
linked
to a
Toon,
Roger
Rabbit.*



toon, death, human defeat, is never presented without being followed by resurrection, transfiguration. A cartoon character can very well be crushed and turned into a plate by a steamroller . . . but he arises immediately, intact, and full of life in the next shot. So it seems evident to me that the American cartoon, rather than glorifying death, is a permanent illustration of the theme of rebirth." In the world of *film noir*, by contrast, the Big Sleep tends to be more permanent; characters who have pianos or safes dropped on them are not likely to get up again.

But in its blend of cartoon animation and *film noir*, *Roger Rabbit* alters both genres in certain ways. Toons can be annihilated by the Dip, for example, and the evil cartoon weasels who accompany Judge Doom on his raids are capable of laughing themselves to death. (The dead weasel Toons promptly become angels with harps, and float off harmlessly, perhaps to a Toon heaven.) Eddie, on the other hand, can be flattened like a pancake in a Toontown elevator and reemerge intact; and Judge Doom, after being crushed by a steamroller, springs back to life as a Toon in disguise.

The elaborate and exquisitely detailed interactions between Toons and real people, Toons and real objects, real people and Toon objects can't all be subsumed under a fully coherent metaphysics, but the film's technical bravura overrides the disparities and creates some exhilarating moments: Eddie and Roger, in a talking Toon taxi named Benny (whose voice, like Roger's, belongs to stand-up comedian Charles

Fleischer), are chased by Judge Doom and his weasels in a real black van; Eddie arms himself for Toontown with a Toon gun given to him by Yosemite Sam, and loads it with talking bullets that sound like Andy Devine and Chill Wills. The world thus assembled (or disassembled) may be an unsteady one, but it feeds on the power of both genres.

The movie begins with a straight cartoon—a Maroon production entitled *Something's Cooking*, starring both Baby Herman and Roger the Rabbit, reportedly an attempt by Zemeckis and company to ape the zaniness of a Looney Tune. It does draw on some of the stuttering and spluttering speech patterns of Sylvester the Cat (according to Zemeckis, Roger has "a Disney body, a Warners head, and a Tex Avery attitude"), but it reminds me much more of a Tom and Jerry cartoon: in its domestic setting, its hyperbolic violence and cruelty, and its overall emphasis on physicality and action over voice and character. Yet there's something about the pile-driver approach of *Something's Cooking* in relation to its classic Tom and Jerry setup (the elliptically framed lady of the house departs after instructing her pet to keep an eye on the baby, and a string of domestic disasters rapidly ensues) that makes it a good deal more unsettling than its sadistic, meat-and-potatoes model, despite the fact that it gets a comparable quota of laughs. Roger slips on soap, is electrocuted, and gets pinned under a fleet of knives while Baby Herman climbs for the cookie jar, unleashing endless

forms of chaos; but there's something distinctly different about the treatment of these catastrophes.

For one thing, Roger Rabbit is warned by the departing matron that if he doesn't keep a lid on things, he's going "back to the science lab"—conjuring up visions in the spectator's mind of vivisection and torture even before the domestic mayhem commences. For another, the frenetic, juiced-up speed and movement of the cascading gags distort the space of the kitchen so that it is made to seem at least as huge as a stadium—an early anticipation of the movie's mainly live-action climax in the comparably vast reaches of the Acme warehouse. From the outset, then, there's a slightly disturbing discrepancy between this cartoon's familiar models—which traditionally took place in a more "realistic" world tied to the present—and its own hyperrealist period nightmare, which is unfolding much more explicitly in a dream space.

It is a dream, moreover, from which we are rudely awakened once we discover that Baby Herman and Roger are on a soundstage—working as actors on a kitchen set of modest (if still exaggerated) proportions—and that Herman himself is a gravel-voiced, cigar-toting adult impersonating an infant. Later we encounter the same degree of elasticity in space and personality when live-action Eddie visits ramshackle and freewheeling Toontown, where the ordinary laws of fixed identities and distances no longer apply, and the Texan tall-tale exaggerations of Tex Avery gags take over. Believing that he has trailed Jessica up to her flat in a normally proportioned building, Eddie first discovers that the woman in question has a monster mug, and then, in flight from her, proceeds out the window, where he discovers there's an infinite drop to the street below. (On the whole, Tex Avery is the presiding influence over most of the cartoon gags in the main body of the film, but usually in more modest doses; the more minimalist and serial inventions of Chuck Jones's Road Runner series are conspicuously absent, apart from the reference to Acme products.)

Perhaps the biggest commercial risk taken by *Roger Rabbit* is its near-exclusive address to those who are familiar with Hollywood cartoons, which may make some other spectators feel as segregated and as discriminated against as the Toons in the movie. The usual assumption

that the world of cartoons belongs to kids, and innocent kids at that, is challenged by this film's plentiful raunchy gags and irreverent undertones: Dolores to Eddie: "Is that a rabbit in your pocket or are you just happy to see me?" Baby Herman to Eddie: "I've got a 50-year-old lust and a 3-year-old dinky." Daffy to Donald: "This is the last time I work with anyone with a speech impediment." Such lines bring home the fact that this is not really a movie for kids, but largely a nostalgic adult male's ironic backward look at the cartoons of his youth. There are references aplenty to movies that unite generations—Judge Doom suffers a meltdown like the wicked witch in *The Wizard of Oz*—but the *film noir* references, such as the nods to *Chinatown*, are less likely to be universal, and adults without a taste for cartoons will probably feel alienated.

The mix of clashing genres that sparked the French New Wave almost 30 years ago, yielding such unstable yet volatile cocktails as *Shoot the Piano Player* (an untidy blend of thriller, slapstick comedy, and tragic love story) and *A Woman Is a Woman* (a "neorealist musical"), is behind some of the peculiar intensity offered here, and whether the jarring mismatches can be enjoyed by the *Star Wars* audience remains to be seen. What this movie shares with the other Spielberg/Lucas blockbusters of the Reagan era, for better and for worse, is an inability to view history as anything other than a reflection of film history (rather than the other way around)—which is as succinct an expression of the Reagan legacy as I can think of.

This historical shortsightedness brings a certain poignancy as well as potency to a limited number of themes but then a queasy void as soon as one steps outside them. I can't claim that *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* transcends the rest of the Spielberg/Lucas oeuvre in this regard, even if it gives the tradition a bit of a bruising in the process of honoring it. There may finally be something morally tacky about equating the neglect of cartoons with the injustices suffered by Jews and blacks—and something merely dotty about the movie's apparent socioeconomic hypothesis that the death of Hollywood cartoons is somehow connected to the birth of Hollywood freeways and the closing down of LA's once wonderful "Big Red" transit system.

The problem certainly isn't that the filmmakers are resourceful enough to broach such

matters, but rather that they use them in a manner already familiar in movies ranging from *Jaws* to *Gremlins* that forecloses any logically developed social critique; the hint of social commentary functions as filigree more than as integral argument. Much as the eponymous beasties of *Gremlins* can be plausibly read at various times as (a) adolescents, (b) blacks, (c) Native Americans, (d) good old boys, (e) people who like Walt Disney (or Steven Spielberg) movies, (f) mischievous kids, (g) hobos, or (h) simple monsters, the Toons of *Roger Rabbit* are geared to suggest different social realities at different stages, but the sum total of these suggestions never adds up to a coherent social or political statement; at best, they can be read as a series of interlocking but independent liberal allegories. The genuine social critique of a *Chinatown*—inspired in part by the Lew Archer novels of Ross Macdonald, which politicized the world of Chandler's Marlowe—is ultimately evoked more than emulated.

But in a movie whose plot and astonishing technical wizardry depend equally on a complex network of accommodations—an intricate system of cooperation and exchanges among film-makers, characters, styles, and genres—the remarkable achievement is that it redeems a debatable approach to film-making around the same time that the approach is belatedly going out of fashion. After about a decade of the spurious mysticism and junk-shop bricolage of Spielberg and Lucas, a style founded on the exaltation of arrested development as a higher principle, here at last is a giddy and glittering labor of love and a grand entertainment that validates their approach to film-making if any movie does, or can.

—JONATHAN ROSENBAUM

BEETHOVEN'S NEPHEW

Directed by Paul Morrissey. Screenplay by Paul Morrissey and Mathieu Carrière, from the novel *Il nipote di Beethoven* by Luigi Magnani. Photography: Hanus Polak. Editing: Albert Jurgenson, Michèle Lauliac.

It seems temptingly easy to make a film about a composer. The sound track can dispense music while the image relieves the audience of boredom with tidbits adapted from or added to the subject's life. Whether the approach is adulatory (*A Song to Remember*) or revisionist (*Amadeus*), it can conjure up a swift portrait of genius—the ability to live and love colorfully, to play an instrument with bravura, to wave

one's arms in front of an orchestra, and occasionally to mark paper with mysterious dots.

It is of course very difficult to make a good film about a composer. Before *Beethoven's Nephew* I can think of only two examples, and they succeed because their makers went to strategic extremes. The Straub-Huillet *Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach* takes the route of austerity, avoiding both emotion and action. Selections from J. S. Bach's music follow one another almost continuously on the sound track while a narrative voice recounts incidents in his life; many of the images simply show the music being played. As a result, the audience is left with the impression of music flowing imperceptibly out of and across all the vicissitudes of Bach's life. Ken Russell's *The Music Lovers* merits the adjectives usually attached to his work—vulgar, tasteless, excessive—but then the same adjectives are attached to Tchaikovsky's music, often by critics who concede its insinuating power. Thus the film convincingly evokes the personal demons that could have driven Tchaikovsky to write such music.

Beethoven's Nephew, however, challenges the conventional biopic on its home ground. The film's style is neither austere nor splashy, while any excesses in its content seem at first merely to place it in the revisionist camp of *Amadeus*: great composer, not so great man. The narrative is drawn from the last period of Beethoven's life. When his brother Karl Casper died in 1815, Beethoven gained joint guardianship of his nine-year-old nephew Karl with the boy's mother Johanna. Over the following years he persistently attempted to gain sole guardianship on the grounds that Johanna was a woman of loose morals, and for a time he succeeded. His emotional need for Karl became both obsessive and possessive, and apparently led to the youth's attempted suicide. When Beethoven fell seriously ill, Karl's delay in calling a doctor, and his insistence on leaving his bedridden uncle in order to fulfill his plans to join the army, probably hastened Beethoven's death.

Although the film invents two characters (Johanna's student lover Michael and Karl's French mistress Léonore) it undoubtedly stays closer to the facts than most biopics; but this is no guarantee of value. Facts may be distorted, and inventions may reflect a possible truth. So it is to the film's advantage that the events of several years seem to take place within a few